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The Making of a Lobbyist

By [Ken Silverstein](#)

Before Jack Abramoff was sentenced on charges of fraud in the purchase of SunCruz Casinos, his friends sent character references to the court to show the kindler, gentler Abramoff—a man who would get you a drink of water or help you look for a lost hamster, a basically good person who lost his moral compass after getting caught up in the high-stakes world of Washington lobbying. But Abramoff's career in apartheid South Africa shows that he never had a moral compass at all.

David Margolick's recent *Vanity Fair* profile of [Jack Abramoff](#) omits a key part of the story, whitewashing Abramoff's past service on behalf of South Africa's apartheid government. Margolick wrote that in the mid-1980s Abramoff went into "show business" and produced *Red Scorpion*, "an anti-Communist parable filmed in Namibia" starring the muscle-bound Dolph Lundgren. But saying that Abramoff was in show business is like describing Jeffrey Dahmer as a man who "dabbled in nouvelle cuisine." *Red Scorpion* was not simply a sloppy piece of propaganda; it was a project of South African military intelligence, and Abramoff, according to my sources, was a willing asset of the apartheid government.

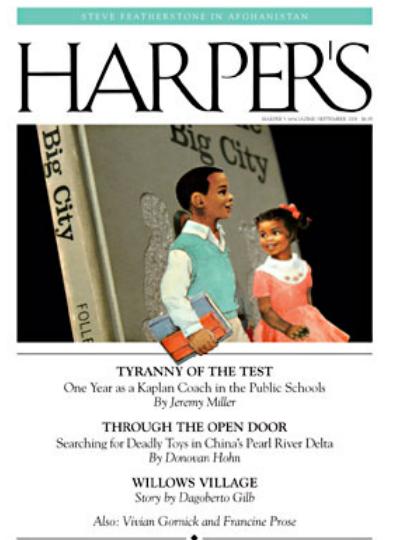
It started when Abramoff, as Chairman of the [College Republican National Committee](#), visited South Africa in 1983. There, he came to know Russel Crystal, a South African intelligence asset who headed a government-funded student front group. Presumably, it was Crystal who in 1986 brought Abramoff in as the first chairman of the International Freedom Foundation

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(IFF)—a seemingly independent right-wing group headquartered in Washington, D.C., that was effectively run from Johannesburg and given the code name “Pacman” by South African intelligence. I spoke to a source who was intimately familiar with the IFF and the key players behind it, and who asked not to be identified. “The South Africans needed front men,” he told me. “Abramoff was identified early on as an ambitious, up-and-coming American conservative who could be useful.”

The IFF/Pacman advocated for the contras in Nicaragua and the mujahideen in Afghanistan. But its primary interest was South Africa, and much of the group's energy was spent attempting to discredit Nelson Mandela and the global antiapartheid movement, opposing sanctions on the government and building support for [Jonas Savimbi](#), the loopy but murderous Angolan faction commander backed by Washington and Pretoria (and upon whom Nikolai, Dolph Lundgren's character in *Red Scorpion*, is loosely based).

Abramoff ran the IFF until he reportedly left in 1989, the year he released *Red Scorpion*. South Africa pulled the money plug in the fall of 1991, and the IFF sputtered on for a few more years before closing up shop. In 1995 *Newsday* reported that the IFF had been a South African front group. Additional details emerged in reports from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: while the IFF did generate a small part of its own income through fundraising, that was primarily to provide cover for the as much as \$1.5 million per year the group received from the apartheid government.

South Africa was careful to cover its tracks, and some people who worked at the IFF were apparently clueless as to their funding's actual source. Rick Sincere, a former staffer, said he learned of the funding from Pretoria in news reports. “It was a well-laundered operation,” Sincere told me. “We'd get tips to apply for money from certain European foundations and they'd approve our grant applications. What I didn't realize at the time was that it was all proforma and we were preapproved. The staff thought it was the hard work of fundraising.”

Abramoff has never acknowledged that he knew of South African government support for the IFF, and told *Newsday* that the allegations that he accepted South African funds for *Red Scorpion* were “outrageous.” He claimed that *Red Scorpion* was an independent venture financed with private money. But according to my source, Abramoff was briefed by South African representatives about the nature and importance of the foundation's work. He became friends with Crystal; they even attended synagogue together. Another IFF member, Craig Williamson, was a South African spy who had previously gained renown within intelligence circles for having infiltrated the African National Congress. Williamson acknowledged earlier this year to South Africa's *Mail & Guardian* that the money for Abramoff's movie came from South Africa.

“Yes, some people were duped by the IFF,” said my source. “But Jack was not one of them. As chairman [of the IFF], he understood where the money was coming from. He knew exactly who he was playing with.” A second source, who also asked not to be identified, agreed: “The only reason that Dolph Lundgren and Grace Jones were traipsing around Namibia was that the

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movie was an official propaganda project."

Abramoff has said he was embarrassed by the violence and profanity in *Red Scorpion* (he blamed the film's director, [Joseph Zito](#)), and after *Red Scorpion* was finished he even created the short-lived Committee for Traditional Jewish Values in Entertainment to fight sex and violence in film. But his values didn't preclude him from taking a helping hand from the apartheid government of South Africa. And certainly it appears that Abramoff learned the tricks he brought to the lobbying trade—cut-outs, bogus charities, financial trickery, and double- and triple-budgeted projects—from his friends at South African intelligence.

Note: I asked Pamela Marple, one of Jack Abramoff's attorneys, for comments on this story last Friday, April 14, and was told that Abramoff, due to the Passover holiday, would be unavailable until Sunday, April 16. By Monday afternoon, I was still awaiting a response.

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